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Negotiating the ‘in-between’: co-researching cultural institutions with children

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This article explores the ‘in-between’ of participatory research, examining how relational practices and knowledge production were negotiated in four experiments of co-researching with children in three Danish cultural institutions. Drawing on the four experiments, which employed a range of qualitative and creative methods, we analyse three relational configurations: between the co-researchers and other children, among the co-researchers themselves, and between the co-researchers and the professional researchers (the authors). Through this lens, we examine tensions between adult institutional frameworks and children’s agency. Rather than representing children’s perspectives, the article critically interrogates our own participatory practice, tracing a shift from facilitating research by children to conducting research with children. We conceptualise the co-research process as an inquiry into the conditions of knowledge production itself, foregrounding asymmetry, dependency, and reciprocity as inherent features of participatory research.

Keywords: children; co-research; relational agency; methodology; participation

Introduction

Participatory research with children has, over the past decades, become a defining methodological and ethical commitment within childhood studies. Emerging from critiques of mainstream developmental psychology and knowledge hierarchies, this tradition has sought to reposition children as competent social actors and legitimate

producers of knowledge (Alderson, 1995; Christensen & James, 2017; James & Prout, 1990). Central to this shift has been the ambition to move beyond researching *on* children towards researching *with* them, often framed through concepts such as voice, agency, empowerment, and co-production (Cassidy et al., 2026; Thomas, 2017; Warming, 2020). In this article we analyse and discuss our own practice of doing co-research with a group of children aged 9–13 in three Danish cultural institutions: the Royal Danish Theatre, the National Museum of Denmark, and the National Gallery of Denmark. Rather than conducting research *on* the experience of children visiting these three institutions, we chose to involve children actively in the research process through four methodological experiments. A core reason for doing this was that the research project BØV – Children as Cultural Citizens[1] aimed to develop an understanding of children as cultural citizens with voice and agency. Based on our interest in children as cultural citizens, we chose to focus on children outside the context of school, in order to understand the possibilities and limitations of how children engage with culture in their leisure time.[2] Within this framework, it was clearly appropriate to invite children into the research process.

However, as existing research has already documented, the redistribution of power implied in participatory research with children is rarely straightforward. When children enter into research processes as co-researchers, their participation does not simply dissolve hierarchies, but can produce complex negotiations of roles, expectations, authority, and responsibility (Cassidy et al., 2026; Hackett et al., 2024; Kazemi, 2025). Although the scholarship on participatory research continues to grow (e.g., Bruselius-Jensen & Winneche Nielsen, 2020; McCafferty et al., 2026; Olsen, 2025; Sevón et al., 2025), much of it foregrounds the outputs of participation, such as children's drawings and photographs (Eldén, 2012; Kirk & Buckingham, 2018; Luttrel, 2010), while paying less attention to the relational and institutional dynamics through which such knowledge is produced (Kazemi, 2025).

In this article, we critically examine our own practice of engaging children in participatory research, tracing a shift in our understanding from research *on* children, through research *by* children, towards research *with* children. We initially understood research by children as a way of moving beyond research on children and towards greater

[1] In Danish, BØV – Børns møde med den nationale kulturarv.
[2] Also in their leisure time, children's participation at cultural institutions like the ones we focus on, is heavily framed and influenced by adults. See Holdgaard & Gram (2026) for an analysis of this.

participation. Through our engagement with the research process, however, we came to question whether this distinction sufficiently captures the relations, dependencies, and power dynamics involved in participatory research. In order to understand these complexities, we use the concept of the 'in between' (Ingold, 2015) as an analytical lens for examining the challenges as well as the potentials of research practices like ours. This enabled us to analyse and discuss the complexity of collaborative inquiry with children (Eldén, 2012) – the messy negotiations that unfold when adult academic agendas and institutional frameworks encounter children's epistemic agency (Gallacher & Gallagher, 2008; Kazemi, 2025; Spyrou, 2011, 2018). The focus of this article is thus not on representing children's perspectives, but on examining our own research practice and the methodological experiments we conducted across the three cultural institutions. The co-research process became an inquiry into the conditions of knowledge production itself: how relations were negotiated, what forms of dependency and asymmetry persisted, and how these shaped the knowledge produced.

The article proceeds as follows. First, we conceptualise the children as co-researchers, positioning our approach between the theoretical ideals of empowerment and epistemic justice and in line with critical scholarship calling for greater reflexivity on the ways in which children are engaged in research processes. We then present the four experiments and the research design. The methodological analysis is structured around three relational configurations: between the co-researchers and other children, among the co-researchers themselves, and between the co-researchers and us as professional researchers. Through this analysis, we explore what such experiments reveal about participatory methodologies, and what possibilities, challenges, and limitations emerge. In the concluding section, we reflect on our own research practice, addressing how a relational and institutionally grounded approach to participatory research engages with dilemmas of power, extractivist research practices and the conditions of knowledge production.

The article contributes to qualitative methodology by foregrounding the relational and institutional conditions of participatory research with children.[3] We argue that if the asymmetries of the research process are left unexamined, the promise of collaborating

[3] We have presented the methods as well as key analytical findings in the article *»Det er sjovt, når man får popcorn« – at have børn som medforskere* (Hansen & Særkjær, 2026).

with children as co-researchers remains incomplete (Gallacher & Gallagher, 2008; Kazemi, 2025). Rather than examining a straightforward route to empowerment, therefore, we examine co-research as an ongoing negotiation between the actors involved in the research process.

Conceptualising children as co-researchers: from research *on* to research *with*

Our research is situated within a paradigmatic shift in childhood studies from researching *on* to researching *with* children (Christensen & James, 2017; Sevón et al., 2025). This shift recognises children as cultural citizens and active co-creators of meaning, rather than passive recipients of (for example) national narratives and culture (Delanty, 2003; Patterson, 2021). Rooted in the 'new' sociology of childhood, this perspective conceptualises children as social actors capable of affecting their own contexts (James & Prout 1990; Spyrou, 2018). A central tenet of this stance is acknowledging children as experts in their own lives. This suggests that their insights are unique and valid epistemic contributions, rather than "empty vessels" or "developing" versions of adult knowledge (Hart, 2008).

Yet translating this recognition into co-research practice requires careful attention to adult-centric paradigms. For example, 'child-friendly methods' have been critiqued for implying that children are inherently different, or that participation is automatically empowering (Fraser et al., 2014). Gallacher and Gallagher (2008, p. 511) stress the adult dependency embedded in participatory practices and advocate for an "attitude of methodological immaturity" to accommodate friction, incompleteness, and unpredictability. Simply providing children with a voice does not dissolve power asymmetries and may even risk romanticising children's perspectives or reproducing adult-defined norms of legitimate expression (Gallacher & Gallagher, 2008; Spyrou, 2011, 2018; Warming, 2016, 2020). Participatory research must therefore remain reflexive, recognising its own complicity in reproducing or disrupting institutional norms.

Children's capacity to act, influence, and participate does not reside solely within the child but emerges through interactions with peers, adults, material surroundings, and institutional contexts (Raithelhuber, 2016; Spyrou, 2018). Spyrou (2018, p. 128) incorporates this in his concept of relational agency that highlights the interdependency between children and adults and their willingness to negotiate the space of agency. In the context of cultural institutions, the relational negotiation of agency becomes particularly

visible. Museums, galleries, and theatres are spaces structured by adult expertise, adult aesthetic conventions, and adult expectations of appropriate conduct (Holdgaard & Klastrup, 2014; Patterson, 2021; Reason, 2010).[4]

For children acting as co-researchers in these settings, their agency unfolds in negotiation with peers, researchers, and institutional norms and goals that define what counts as meaningful participation. Recognising this, we move beyond the ideal of research conducted *by* children, giving voice and agency to children to a focus on the in-between spaces of co-research with children. It emphasises that participatory research with children is always negotiated within relational and institutional frameworks, and that it is in the in-between that both children's and researchers' understandings of knowledge, authority, and participation are produced and transformed. As a consequence, the analysis and methodology must also include an analysis of the in-betweens of the research process. To clarify what we mean by the in-between of co-research, we draw on Ingold's way of differentiating 'between' from 'in-between' (Ingold, 2015). Whereas 'between' assumes a world of already formed entities connected across a divide, 'in-between' refers to a condition of ongoing movement in which relations and meanings emerge through practice. From this perspective, the in-between is not a liminal space between child and adult, or between data collection and analysis. It is the relational condition through which participatory research unfolds as children and researchers respond to one another within institutional settings. Conceptualising participatory research as 'in-between' thus shifts analytical attention away from assessing outcomes and towards examining how roles, authority, agency, and knowledge are continuously enacted in practice.

The in-between is also shaped by the positionalities of those involved in the research process. Researchers are neither neutral observers nor external to the worlds they study. They enter the field with histories, affiliations, and ways of knowing that shape access, interpretation, and interaction (Dwyer & Buckle, 2009). Our own engagement with cultural institutions and participatory research was informed by prior professional and methodological experience, situating us as professional researchers neither fully inside nor outside these settings. At the same time, the children entered into the research

[4] Earlier studies of children's participation in museum contexts have foregrounded tensions between participatory ideals and institutional authority, highlighting how agency is negotiated rather than granted (e.g., Holdgaard & Boritz, 2022).

process with their own situated positions shaped by age, peer relations, prior experiences, and their situated encounters with institutional norms. We approach positionality as relational and processual, continuously constituted through interaction between children, researchers, institutional contexts, and the unfolding research process. In this sense, positionality itself becomes part of the in-between: a condition through which knowledge is co-produced, rather than a perspective that is to be left out.

The experiments

The reflections and analytical perspectives presented in this article are based on a study consisting of four experiments conducted between June 2023 and February 2025. The study was a part of the BØV project researching the experiences of children visiting the National Gallery of Denmark, the National Museum of Denmark, and the Royal Danish Theatre.

Following Gallacher and Gallagher (2008), our research was designed as a reflexive and adaptive process rather than an exercise in data extraction. By treating each experiment as a site for methodological reflection we focused on the 'doing' of the research at each of the cultural institutions, allowing our practice to develop through the specific constraints and opportunities of each encounter. While the experiments did investigate a range of activities and sites at the participating institutions, our main reason for choosing to approach the research as experiments was to ensure a continued focus on the *process* of doing research with children. How did the different methods work? What did we learn about our own role in relation to the children? Which data was generated through the experiments?

In planning the experiments, we approached the children as co-researchers while remaining sensitive to differences among them and to the specific ethical demands of our different positions. Methodologically, this required moving beyond a singular reliance on "child-friendly" methods (Fraser et al., 2014). Instead, we employed a diverse methodological toolkit that included a variety of participatory and creative approaches (Reason, 2010) alongside more traditional research methods, allowing for the kind of flexibility and "methodological immaturity" (Gallacher & Gallagher, 2008) necessary to respond to the specificities of each experiment. Methods included drawing, photo elicitation, peer interviews, co-development of interview guides, and observational activities such as "talk-and-draw" (Kirk & Buckingham, 2018; Reason, 2008, 2010).

Importantly, methods were adapted iteratively: for example, the initial peer interviews were unstructured, but they gradually incorporated scaffolding to support children's contribution.

A total of 33 children aged 9–13 participated as co-researchers.[5] The participants were recruited through after-school programmes (in Danish: SFO), except in Experiment 1, where all the participating children were recruited through the same leisure activity and contacted via their parents. This meant that in all of the experiments, the co-researchers knew each other beforehand, with one exception in Experiment 2 where three of the children came from two other schools than the rest of the participants.

In accordance with the aim of the BØV project – to explore children's experiences of visiting cultural institutions in their leisure time – all the experiments were conducted outside the school setting. Unlike much participatory research conducted within children's familiar environments, the study engaged children in cultural institutions with which they were largely unfamiliar; for many of the children, this was their first visit to these specific museums or theatre. The experiments took place in four institutional settings (see Scheme 1).

[5] When quoting, we have chosen to anonymise as our analysis is not about the doings of the individual child.

Experiment	Time	Setting	Participant	Methods
1	June 2023	*Postyrium* in Viborg (mobile theatre playground by the Royal Danish Theatre)	11 children (6 boys, 5 girls)	Photo elicitation, peer interviews, drawing (visual mapping).
2	March 2024	The performance *Brødrene Løvehjerte* by the Royal Danish Theatre, presented in Musikhuset Aarhus	9 children (3 girls, 6 boys)	Drawing (spider diagrams), co-developing interview guides, peer interviews. Revisit after 2 weeks (group analysis of spider diagram).
3	July 2024	Children's Museum and the Ancient Egypt exhibition at the National Museum	13 girls	Co-developing interview guides, peer interviews with other children, 'talk-and-draw' observations, photo elicitation, drawing (spider diagrams).
4	February 2025	The workshop space and the contemporary exhibition at the National Gallery	6 girls	Co-developing interview guides, peer interviews with other children, 'talk-and-draw' observations, photo elicitation, drawing (architectural building). Revisit after 6 weeks (memory drawing).

Scheme 1

Across all the experiments, the time spent with the co-researchers was between three and five hours, including social elements, such as play and snacks. Experiments 3 and 4 involved the same cohort of children, offering a longitudinal perspective on the development of their co-researcher identities and experiences. Experiments 2 and 4 also included revisits, as we wanted to invite the children to reflect on and contribute to the analysis of the empirical material created during their visit to the cultural institutions.

The empirical material is multilayered. It includes children's 'primary' contributions (photos, drawings, peer interviews) as well as 'secondary' material generated in the in-between: field notes on interactions, children's reflections on their roles as co-researchers, and collaborative interpretation during revisits. Treating these relational dynamics as analytical material highlights that knowledge production is co-constructed, not simply generated by the child or adult researchers alone. For this article, we revisited the empirical material – including field notes, interview transcripts, photos, and drawings – with a particular focus on the in-between and the relations unfolding within the research process.

Analysis

Our analysis is structured around three relational configurations that shaped the research process, including the way in which the empirical material was generated – namely, the relations between the co-researchers and other children, the relations among the co-researchers, and the relations between the co-researchers and the professional researchers. This structure provides insight into how the conditions of knowledge production on children's engagement with cultural heritage in our research project were shaped by these respective relations in a process that was "necessarily complex, incomplete and messy" (Gallacher & Gallagher, 2008, p. 511).

Relations between the co-researchers and other children

This first analytical section foregrounds how relational agency unfolded when the co-researchers interviewed other children in the cultural institutions. Initially, we approached this format as a way of strengthening agency: if participation meant research *by* children, then positioning the co-researchers as interviewers – and thereby enabling them to gain a voice – could potentially redistribute epistemic authority within the research setting.

However, analysing these encounters between the co-researchers and other visiting children through a relational and institutionally situated lens revealed that agency and asymmetry were simultaneously produced in the in-between space where children's relational agency collided with researcher expectations and institutional framings.

The reason this format was adopted was that, during Experiment 2, one of the co-researchers could not understand why the co-researchers were supposed to interview each other about their experiences, rather than interviewing other children. The co-researcher's question made us reflect on why we had chosen this format: was it mainly because it was practically difficult to recruit other children, or was it also because this would have been more uncontrollable for us and we would have needed to trust the co-researchers to be able to perform interviews with children not engaged in the research process?

To allow the co-researchers to influence the design of the experiments, in Experiments 3 and 4 they worked in small groups to develop interview guides (with our guidance) based on their own interests and conceptions of what an interview about a museum experience would entail. They then conducted interviews at the National Museum and the National Gallery. They were highly engaged and eager to recruit participants and carry out the interviews, not least because they were carrying recorders and were visibly positioned as interviewers. Their enthusiasm was partly tied to inhabiting an unfamiliar museum space in a new capacity, but it also illustrated relational agency in practice: they actively occupied the interviewer role and embraced the authority it afforded. Yet the field notes suggest that the interviews were often brief and highly task-oriented:

> *Although I* [*researcher*] *have said that longer interviews are better than many, it does not really seem to have had any effect. They are extremely efficient, and it is clear that they find it exciting, but their interviews also proceed quickly. Perhaps it is just as much about the fact that they actually want to reach as many children as possible.*
> (Field notes, Experiment 4)

The interviews demonstrate competence and attentiveness, asking the interviewees to speak louder and to remember to turn the recorder on and off, but with limited elaboration:

Co-researcher 1: Okay. What's your name?
Child: Pelle.
Co-researcher 2: Sorry, what? Can you say that a bit louder?
Child: Pelle.
Co-researcher 1: Okay. What's the best thing about this museum?
Child: Um, nothing.
Co-researcher 1: Okay. Do you like being here?
Child: Yes.
Co-researcher 2: Are you here with anyone?
Child: Yes.
Co-researcher 2: Who are you with?
Child: My grandfather.
Co-researcher 1: Okay. Have you tried anything exciting here at this museum?
Child: Um, yes.
Co-researcher 1: What is it that's really exciting here at this museum?
Co-researcher 2: Was it that room in there?
Child: No, the castle.
Co-researcher 1: Thank you for letting us interview you.
Co-researcher 2: The red button.
(Interview, Experiment 3)

This example illustrates the tensions that emerged in the in-between of participatory research and the ongoing dilemma of our position as researchers: to what extent should we allow the children to conduct interviews in their own ways, and to what extent should we intervene to ensure that they followed instructions and produced data that provided valuable knowledge into how children engage with cultural institutions? There is no correct answer to how this balance should be handled, but it points to the importance of remaining attentive to and reflective about the in-between, both during and after the experiments.

The example also reveals a tension between how the children conducted the interviews and the institutional norms concerning what constitutes 'proper' research. Interviewing

became less an open-ended exploration of lived experience and more a performance of what counted as legitimate research within the museum context – characterised by structured questioning, efficiency, correct handling of recording devices, and appropriate closure. The emphasis on 'doing the interview correctly' illustrated how institutional norms of the competent researcher and the 'good participant' continued to shape participation even when formal roles were redistributed.[6]

We would argue that the co-researchers' way of interviewing was not a sign of a lack of interest in their peers' experiences, but simply a demonstration of the fact that interviewing is a complex practice. Relational agency (Spyrou, 2018) does not imply symmetrical competence or shared standards of what constitutes a 'good' research interview. During the revisit conversations, some of the co-researchers emphasised that it was important to listen carefully and to ask questions, suggesting that they were aware of what proper interviewing entails, even though their own practice did not necessarily align with these expectations. One co-researcher later remarked that it might have been easier to interview adults, because "they understand what you are saying".

The relations between the co-researchers and the children they interviewed also surfaced dilemmas in our research approach. The attempt to amplify the co-researchers' agency meant that the children interviewed were sometimes given limited space to elaborate their answers. Responses were brief, and new questions followed quickly. The redistribution of authority thus produced a new asymmetry. Developing the interview guide and conducting the interviews without adult interference contributed to the co-researchers' agency and also influenced the focus of the interviews. Yet the discursive space available to the children interviewed was constrained by the style of interviewing, which rushed through the interview guide without necessarily being interested in either detailed answers or alternative perspectives. Recruitment practices further illustrate this relational complexity:

> *The co-researchers simply approach the other children and ask whether they would like to be interviewed. No further explanation is given* (*and it is hardly realistic to expect them to present the purpose*)*. Here, the recruitment differs greatly from when*

[6] As Gallacher and Gallagher (2008) suggest, participatory research often produces particular ideas of the child as the "good participant": attentive, reflective, and aligned with institutional values.

> *we recruit ourselves. The interviewed children are not told what they are participating in, and the question is whether this counts as informed consent. I* [*researcher*] *can also sense that, on the occasions when I recruit children for them, I am more direct than I would otherwise be, and I do not turn away the accompanying adults who encourage the child to say yes*.
> (Field notes, Experiment 3)

Even when we attempted to step back, we became active in the research process, and our responsibility and obligations remained operative. Our attempt to facilitate research *by* children thus turned out not to be a harmonious site of empowerment, but a space where relational agency, institutional norms, and ethical responsibility intersected and sometimes collided.

While this format aimed to give co-researchers agency and a voice, it thus sometimes constrained the agency of the children being interviewed. These children were rarely given the opportunity to elaborate, either because they did not fully understand the questions or because the co-researchers quickly moved on to the next one. This dynamic was not limited to the children alone. Accompanying adults occasionally tried to persuade their children to participate, likely believing that they were helping.

The relations between co-researchers and other children in our experiments demonstrate that agency is always relational, and that power and ethical dilemmas remain present in research processes even when the adult researcher seeks to step back from of the process of generating empirical material. Our attempts to withdraw from these interactions revealed that power imbalances did not disappear in our absence. Rather, ideas about what constituted a 'good interview', for example, continued to shape both the co-researchers' practices and the production of data.

Relations among the co-researchers

In the previous section, we examined the relations between the co-researchers and other children, highlighting some methodological and ethical challenges. This section focuses on relations among the co-researchers and relational agency within the groups. The dialogue and interactions among the co-researchers were an integral part of the research

process, shaping how they assumed the role of co-researchers, how they engaged, and the kinds of empirical material produced.

A central aspect that emerged across the empirical material was the constant negotiation and bonding among the co-researchers, demonstrating the social and collective dimensions of the co-research process. These negotiations were playful and affirming, yet also conflictual, and they at times placed individual children in vulnerable or ambivalent positions. For example, when we asked a group of co-researchers to select an artwork or a location that was important to them, the process involved not only individual reflections, but also social interaction and positioning. What would the other co-researchers choose, and was it safe to make different choices?

These dynamics also operated in the phase of analysing the empirical material together with the co-researchers. During the revisits in Experiments 2 and 4, we talked to the co-researchers about their experiences, allowing them to talk not only about their own experience and their own empirical material, but also about each other's. As part of these conversations, questions about 'correct' understanding of the experience and of the research project occurred. The following example illustrates why our role in the process also included allowing for diverse perspectives and toning down judgmental approaches to interpretation.

During the revisit in Experiment 2, we worked with drawings that the co-researchers had produced immediately after the performance of *Brødrene Løvehjerte,* focusing on the most important aspects of their experience. At the revisit, they were invited to reflect on each other's work.

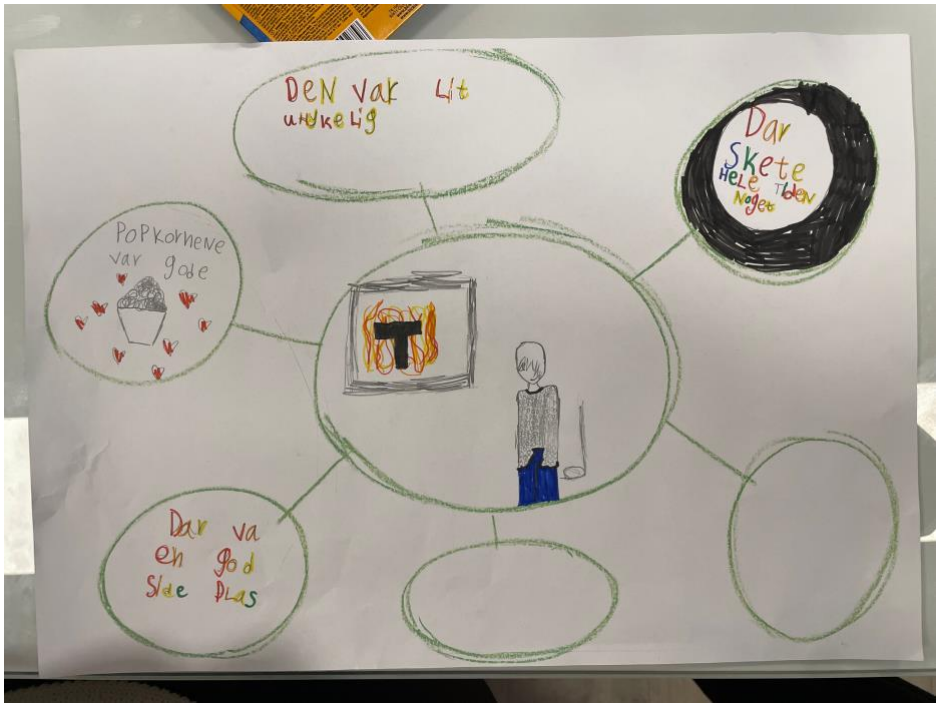


Illustration 1: Drawing by co-researcher

Here one co-researcher had depicted "the whole audience turned into one person" (see illustration 1). The other co-researchers responded with reactions such as: "That makes no sense"; another co-researcher, when asked "What do you learn about her theatre experience from the drawing?", replied: "Not a thing." These responses demonstrated that the co-researchers' meaning-making was continuously being negotiated and was subject to peer evaluation. It can be understood as an example of what Spyrou describes with reference to Kellett: that children are not exempt from power differences ascribed to different groups of children which are likely to shape the research encounter (Spyrou, 2011, p. 155). This meant that in examples like the above, it was important that a professional (adult) researcher was present. Our presence potentially created another kind of power imbalance, but at the same time it was also our responsibility to ensure that the co-researchers had an experience in which it was both okay to have a different opinion to the other co-researchers and possible for social bonds to be created and confirmed. Such considerations relate to research ethics and the responsibility of ensuring that all co-researchers were able to express their opinions without being overruled by the others. They also relate to the quality of the research, which lay not only in allowing different

perspectives, but also in examining the diversity represented in the empirical material, thereby documenting the richness and complexity of the children's experiences.

Negotiation among the co-researchers also appeared in subtler ways, such as copying or aligning drawings. In one instance:

> *All three girls draw nearly the same thing, and especially the two of them make this quite clear because they want to draw the same subject. They did not know each other before the performance, but they clearly begin to form a friendship during the process.* (Field notes, Experiment 2)

This form of copying, as displayed in Experiment 2, could be considered less interesting, or as an unoriginal contribution to the research process. However, according to Cassidy et al. (2026), it is important that we as researchers are conscious of our perspective, our own cultural values, and how we might 'want' children to respond (p. 102). At the outset, we saw copying or mimicking as processes creating empirical material of lower quality, because it reduced the richness of the material and compromised the documentation of the individual experiences and perspectives. But this practice occurred in all four of the experiments, which made us question our earlier understanding. Instead we began to understand that the process of expressing and making meaning of a cultural experience should perhaps be understood relationally as a process in which social bonding and the recognition of ideas and experiences were also important aspects.

Beyond the negotiation of ideas, the co-researchers' interactions also illustrated the importance of the social dimension of participation. The joy of doing the activities together, the shared laughter, and the sense of belonging to a peer group were central to their engagement. It is likely that the co-researchers' motivation was not only to provide the 'right' answers for the research, but also to participate in a way that maintained social cohesion and avoided standing out or being different. In other words, being part of the group and sustaining relationships sometimes guided their choices more than responding in line with what they perceived was expected by the adult researchers. This reinforced our appreciation that co-research is a relational and affective practice in which belonging, peer approval, and collective experience shape both the process and the material produced. In our experiments, our asking the co-researchers to engage with events,

activities, and objects they did not have prior experience with or predefined opinions on, might have intensified this effect.

The co-researchers also generated both important insights and social bonding in moments that fell outside the formal research setting, but turned out to be important for the research process. In Experiment 2, during a test interview about leisure activities, all the members of one co-researcher group mentioned gaming as an interest. However, neither of the co-researcher interviewers followed up on this (as instructed), but moved straight onto the next question in their interview guide. Once the interviews ended, they immediately began asking each other *what* games they played. This example both illustrates how difficult interviewing as a method can be, and shows that the co-researchers provided more insight into their lifeworld and social interaction when they broke with the methodological framework. It further demonstrates that the empirical material was generated not just when the selected methods were applied, but precisely in the in-between.

Similarly, in other experiments, the co-researchers engaged in playful, unscripted interactions, joking, playing mixing Danish and English, discussing friendships and boyfriends, or simply fooling around. Initially, we (the researchers) perceived these moments as methodological failures, because they deviated from planned research process, but it was also clear that something was happening between the children in these moments.

These episodes reveal how relational agency emerges in the in-between: in the spaces where structure and improvisation, task and play, instruction and peer dynamics intersect. Here the children's peer-oriented practices collided with the adult methodological expectations, making visible the conditions under which certain forms of engagement are recognised as data and others dismissed as noise. In retrospect, we understand these situations as the co-researchers' takeover of the power of the research process, stepping out of the role and tasks given by us. This was possible because they were in it together, and because it was important to interact with each other. This interaction too is important to include in the research process: not just in the moment, but also in the process of analysing data.

Overall, the relations among the co-researchers demonstrated that co-research is a collective, negotiated, and relational process. Play, copying, conflict, dialogue, and

informal interaction – all shaped the empirical material. The in-between thus captures not only intersections of children's agency and institutional norms, but also the social and affective dynamics of working collaboratively.

Relations between the co-researchers and the professional researchers

This section examines the relations between the co-researchers and the researchers, highlighting the tension between the 'planned' research and the 'actual' encounters, as characterised by some of the friction and unpredictability described by Gallacher and Gallagher (2008). As the examples above illustrate, moments of fooling around, playful behaviour, and social bonding revealed how the co-researchers were creating relationships with one another and participating in a temporary peer community.

It was particularly in these in-between moments, when the co-researchers deviated from the planned framework and behaved in ways that did not align with our expectations, that they most clearly challenged us as researchers, while simultaneously shaping the relations unfolding both among themselves and with us.

When the co-researchers appeared unserious or failed to ask follow-up questions during interviews, our field notes sometimes reveal irritation or frustration: for instance, when a group is described as "less serious" than another group, when there is said to be "a high level of energy" and "they forget immediately their task", or when a professional researcher says: "I know you're tired." What emerges in the material are researchers who certainly acknowledged children's differences and needs, but who also held an implicit notion of "the good research child" (Hackett et al., 2024). Despite positioning children as experts in their own lives and using methods intended to respect children's ways of communicating, we nevertheless found ourselves (re)producing views of "the good research child" or, in our case, "the good child co-researcher".

It became evident that the unpredictability and the messy parts of the process were not only the moments in which we were challenged the most, but also those from which we learned the most – particularly about our own expectations regarding how a research process should unfold and what constitutes "the good research child". These moments rendered the research process more complex, requiring a different form of analytical attentiveness and a reconsideration of how knowledge emerges.

This is illustrated in a conversation that followed after observations in the Ancient Egypt exhibition at the National Museum, where the co-researchers discussed their experiences of mummies:

> *Professional researcher: But do you think they're alive*?
> *Co-researcher 1: Yes*.
> *Co-researcher 2: No*.
> *Co-researcher 1: Its brain is still working. It goes duk duk duk*.
> *Co-researcher 2: But you do it there*.
> *Professional researcher: So, it was creepy and surprising. Anything else*?
> *Co-researcher 1: Yes, that they fart at night*.
> *Co-researcher 2: Do they fart at night*?
> *Co-researcher 1: Yes, you don't know. You're not them*.
> *Co-researcher 3: There's another thing. Those earrings. Why are they so small*?
> *Professional researcher: Yes, that's a good question*.
> *Co-researcher 1: They made them themselves. And they fit its ears*.
> (Conversation after observations, Experiment 3)

The conversation initially appears distinctly playful and somewhat chaotic. The bodily humour and the reference to 'living mummies' contributed to an atmosphere that could be perceived as messy or unserious from a research perspective. At the same time, however, the exchange generated valuable insight into how the children engaged with cultural heritage, including their curiosity about the size of the objects and their reflections on how these artefacts might have been used. The example thus illustrates a central methodological tension: what appears as disruption within a researcher-defined framework may simultaneously constitute a meaningful mode of engagement and a valuable contribution to the research process. Such moments of collision can therefore be understood as expressions of ownership and affective investment in the topic, rather than something to be dismissed as off-task behaviour. A similar dynamic emerged in another example, in which two pairs of co-researchers were developing their interview guide at the same time, resulting in less attention being paid to one of the groups by the researcher:

> *The fact that two pairs are conducting interviews at the same time means that I cannot be fully present all the time. This typically results in the group that I perceive as most focused being largely left to carry out the test interview and develop the interview guide on their own. This, among other things, leads to them including the question "What is your favourite animal?" in the guide*. (Field notes, Experiment 3)

The inclusion of the question about the favourite animal may seem tangential. Yet analytically, it demonstrates how the co-researchers appropriated the methodological framework and reshaped it according to their own priorities. Autonomy here does not necessarily result in greater alignment with research objectives; rather, it produces a different orientation. Together, the two examples show that agency within the co-research process emerged relationally and situationally. Moments of humour, divergence, or unexpected questioning did not necessarily signal a lack of seriousness but rather revealed how the conditions of knowledge production were being negotiated between researchers and co-researchers. What counts as 'focus', 'relevance', or 'good' participation is itself part of this negotiation.

The co-researchers' agency was exercised through their active attempts to refine the research methodology itself. This was illustrated in a spontaneous moment before the performance of *Brødrene Løvehjerte* began:

> *Just before the lights are turned off after the interval, one of the co-researchers looks at me and says: "Louise, when you interview children, you have to remember to ask whether they got popcorn or not. Because when they get popcorn, it is fun!"* (Field notes, Experiment 2)

This instruction about popcorn suggests that the co-researchers felt positioned as experts whose perspectives were being sought after. Moreover, it showcases that they were taking ownership of methodological aspects of the research process, reflecting on what constitutes a study into children's cultural experiences. This sense of ownership, and the experience of being taken seriously, was a central element in the experiments. By acknowledging popcorn, living mummies, and favourite animals as valuable inputs to the

research design, we attempted to move the research process away from an extractivist model towards one where expertise was produced relationally.

The tension between guiding or controlling the co-researchers and engaging in co-production of the research process can be understood as an ongoing relational dilemma: were we shaping their contributions too strongly, or was it precisely through our questions, prompts, and support that something potentially transformative became possible? Across the empirical material, we have observed examples both of co-researchers using exactly the suggestions we provided (for instance, during a revisit, when they mainly drew elements that we had previously mentioned) and of our own reflections on whether we were guiding them too much. There is not necessarily a clear-cut answer; rather, this dilemma became part of the relation that emerged between us, highlighting the importance of recognising how we continuously influenced one another.

Similarly, when the co-researchers copied each other's drawings, this could be understood as a way of moving socially closer to one another. It demonstrates how research is a social practice through which relations are developed and sustained, potentially contributing to the co-production of knowledge.

A central focus of our approach was to ensure that the co-researchers had a positive experience within these unfamiliar institutional settings. This included that we had to cultivate their trust, acknowledge their contributions to the research process and support social bonding between us and them. This was not merely an ethical, but also a methodological imperative: the children's sense of being seen and valued as contributors shaped the depth of their engagement. In order to do this, it was important to adapt to the interests and competences of the co-researchers, as shown in this example:

> *One of the co-researchers does not want to draw or write but is willing to tell me about his experience if we move a little away from the others. I ask questions, he talks, and I write notes on the drawing board. He finds it difficult to put many words to his experience but begins by saying that he thought the story was a bit strange. He also explains that he was not very involved in the performance because he did not know what to say or where to stand. When asked, he adds that he did not really want to participate more, as he had never experienced theatre before and therefore found it difficult. When I ask what questions he*

> *would pose to other children who had experienced* [*Anonymised*]*, he says, "The same as you've asked", and when I ask what he will tell people at home about the experience, he says that it was "cool". I show him that I have filled the entire sheet with his answers; he becomes proud and shows the others how much he has done.* (Field notes, Experiment 1)

The field note provides a good example of research *with* – of the importance of ensuring that all co-researchers are given a voice, rather than withdrawing from the process as researchers. Here, the professional researcher facilitated the co-researcher's opportunity to express himself, both in relation to his experience and his methodological reflections. This may be understood as a way in which the co-researcher achieved agency – by acting not independently, but relationally. As the description suggests, this co-researcher received acknowledgement for his contribution and simultaneously used this to form a connection with the other co-researchers when he showed them what he had produced. Another example of the importance of trust and social bonding in the research process is captured in our field notes from a revisit:

> *Two of the co-researchers* [*boys*] *welcomed us and said they had been waiting for several hours. They seemed excited and happy about seeing us again. They were quick to show us to the room that had been reserved for us and immediately set off to find the others. We were also greeted by a teacher, who went to look for the missing children, but one of the co-researchers got there first.* (Field notes, revisit, Experiment 2)

The boys' enthusiasm and eagerness suggested that the relation between us was grounded in something different from their everyday school lives – something more informal, less constrained by institutional expectations. During this visit, the boys reflected that they felt they "were not allowed to speak as much as girls" at school. Their participation as co-researchers thus offered a space for recognition that they did not feel in their everyday school life.

The example above indicates that agency is not solely about gaining independent control over the research process. As Wyness (2015) argues, children's own

understanding of agency is often relational, rooted in collaboration with adults and in the opportunity for dialogue rather than total autonomy. In our experiments, agency was experienced through recognition and interaction, even though the involvement of the co-researchers was characterised by dilemmas which became particularly evident in their relations with us, both regarding the idea of the good co-researcher and the balances that constantly tipped back and forth.

Knowledge production: the in-between

When we invited the children to participate in the BØV project as co-researchers, it was based on the ideal of making space for children to have their own voice, not only at the cultural institutions, but also in the research process. As we started out, we thought that moving beyond research conducted *on* children to research *by* children would fulfil this ideal best.

Through the iterative process of developing and carrying out the four experiments, however, we came to recognise that research by children may also obscure the power relations, conflicts, and dependencies that inevitably shape research processes. Working closely with our material, we gradually came to understand that what had in fact been unfolding across the experiments was research *with* children, a process built on reciprocity and more complex than we had anticipated. As a consequence, it also became even more important for us to be transparent about the conditions under which knowledge is produced.

Moving towards an approach of doing research with children opened up space to recognise the value of everything that unfolded around the 'actual' empirical data collection. This enabled us to understand the contribution of the co-researchers as more than their performance as, for example, interviewers. In our experiments, knowledge was produced not just when the co-researchers applied methods like drawing, interviews, and observations, but also in the in-betweens of the research process. Involving the children as co-researchers led us to pay more attention to how we worked together and thus to the unfolding of the research process than would likely have been the case had the children produced contributions on their own. We influenced one another relationally, which seemed to support the view that agency is always relational and situated, rather than something children (or others) achieve in isolation (Spyrou, 2018).

In this process, the reciprocity of the research process became visible. Particularly when viewing research through an extractivist perspective, it is essential that both parties learn and benefit from the collaboration (Spyrou, 2024). These benefits need not be identical; rather, their differing nature is especially significant in relation to the distinct roles and forms of value the process holds for co-researchers and for professional researchers. From our perspective, the process resulted in an increased awareness of our own blind spots, our role as researchers, and the conditions of knowledge production. In addition, it generated methodological insights and deepened our understanding of children's perceptions of quality and their experiential worlds.

It could still be argued that we might have challenged the methodological framework more radically. One way in which we could have done so was by working with the co-researchers over a longer period. The duration of the experiments was in many ways insufficient to establish deeper relations and methodological development that might have made this possible. Furthermore, there is value in allowing children to move around and experience the institutions more freely – something they did not do when they participated within our research framework. This would most likely have required more time during each session, or, alternatively, working with the same group of children across all the experiments. An extended period of collaboration aligns with Spyrou's point that deeper involvement is a crucial factor if children are to become more than merely sources of data (2024). The inclusion of the same children in Experiments 3 and 4 as well as the revisits in Experiments 2 and 4 were steps towards that. A more longitudinal collaboration could have strengthened the negotiations that became visible in the in-between of our research process – in the unstable, relational space where the children's initiatives, peer interactions, researcher expectations, and institutional logics intersect.

In this article, we have critically examined our own practice of engaging children in participatory research, and we have traced a shift in our understanding from facilitating research by children to conducting research with children. The focus has been not on representing children's perspectives, but on examining our own research practice and the methodological experiments we conducted at three cultural institutions. We achieved this by paying attention to the relational aspects of the research process, focusing on three relational configurations all of which together formed the research process: between the

co-researchers and other children, among the co-researchers, and between the co-researchers and ourselves. As much as an investigation into the experiences of children at cultural institutions, the co-research process thus became an inquiry into the conditions of knowledge production itself – into how relations are negotiated, what forms of dependency and asymmetry persist, and how these shape the knowledge produced.

We understand this process as an in-between – a position that is not a methodological residue, but a site where knowledge is co-produced, tensions are negotiated, and asymmetries are both reproduced and unsettled. Moments of copying, disagreement, laughter, or improvisation, which could easily be framed as methodological 'failures', we see instead as part of what Gallacher and Gallagher describe as a deliberate methodological immaturity (2008). These moments are important because they reveal how knowledge was co-constructed relationally and how institutional norms were simultaneously both followed and contested. From a methodological perspective, these insights underscore the need to treat participatory research as an institutionally situated, relational epistemic negotiation. Agency is not pre-given but emerges through interaction; and the site of the in-between foregrounds the responsibility of researchers to reflect on their own roles, expectations, and contributions to the epistemic ordering of cultural institutions.

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